Fresh Nails

Stories About Moving to the Country And Building a House

By Margaret Santon

Editor: Rick Santon

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Photography, Rick Santon.

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Dedication

I dedicate this memoir to my parents, who always assured me I could accomplish whatever I wanted to accomplish.

~~ Margaret Santon

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About the Author

After managing to live a fairly good life with Parkinson's Disease for thirty years, Margaret passed away peacefully among friends and family on May 28th, 2025, eleven weeks after her eightieth birthday. The two major benefits she gave to the world were running her Columbine School For Exceptional Children for twenty years and establishing, with others, the Durham Recycling Centre in 1979. For a few earlier, interesting years, she worked as a scrub nurse in the O.R.

Margaret became a writer after moving to Hastings. She had some success writing for magazines and had a long run with a gardening column in local newspapers. More lately, she enjoyed writing general stories about her life for her writing group in Campbellford and The Tribune out of Warkworth.

In her last two years, because of illness, she struggled to complete this manuscript which was very important to her. I promised her I would get it done for her and I believe I have succeeded in being as true as possible to her intentions.

Rick Santon

Chapter 1

Beforehand

Less than a century ago, it was not uncommon to design and construct your own home. One writer calls house construction a “basic life activity, an ordinary task like changing a flat.” Both Rick’s grandfather and my grandfather built their own houses in Toronto. Their homes stand today, enhancing their neighbourhoods.

The country was where my friends, who were city folk, went for a holiday, a break from the bustle of town. I thought I knew all about living in the country and figured I'd like to do it one day. What I "knew" was that people in the country were artless and naive compared to their city relatives. All the features of rural life, I thought, would simply be the opposite of city life, like peace and quiet instead of traffic noise and long, beautiful vistas instead of streets lined with towering buildings. Of course, when I got to the country, it was nothing like what I'd imagined. There was a lot to learn. I was glad that Rick was interested in the project, too.

I knew about living in the suburbs of a large city. Having grown up in Scarborough, I had the best of both worlds, city and country. If I went out the front door, I was headed for the stores, downtown, or the mall. Whenever I used to exit the back door of the house, I'd be looking at Scarborough Bluffs and the lake, a wild, natural scene.

I loved the city and what I thought I knew of the country, too. I considered myself to be sophisticated even though my dad insisted the word "sophisticated" meant "spoiled by education and worldliness." Nevertheless, I was more than willing to try living in the country if it meant I could build my own house. Rick and I talked about it for years. In the end, it was economics that gave us the push. In the early eighties, the mortgage rates were above twenty percent, and ours was due for renewal. We were sure we

could build cheaper and probably better than the standard fare we saw going up around us in town.

I began to read books on the subject of designing and building, focusing on alternative-type homes. One day, we decided to go to the country and have a look at what was available.

Chapter 2

Looking for the Right Place

Rick and I had been to the Village of Hastings once on a boat trip, but we didn't know much about the area. It became the focus of our search for a country property when my parents moved there in 1983. They bought a good house with some of the loveliest vistas I've ever come across for a very small price. Inspired by their good fortune, one weekend afternoon, Rick and I drove to Campbellford down the road from Hastings and dropped into a randomly selected real estate office.

We knew what we wanted: To build our own house on a small acreage with a South-facing hill for solar gain and a view of the water. Of course, this is what everyone wanted, so we weren't sure if we could afford it if we did manage to find it. We gave the duty agent a rundown of our requirements, and he had just one listing to show us. Interestingly, the listing was all he showed us. If we wanted to see the property, we could drive over and have a look and call him in the morning if we were interested. He didn't seem to expect a call.

“Isn't that a north-facing hill?” I inquired as he handed me a copy of the listing.

“Yes,” he replied.

We drove back toward Hastings and found the four acres. When we encountered a little difficulty locating the gate at the corner of the lot, I recalled the agent muttering something about the road along the property's frontage having been permanently closed recently. No open road frontage had implications beyond making it a very private place, but I was oblivious to them at this point.

Rick swung open the big farm gate and drove into a flat field where the grass was cut like a rugged lawn. Ahead of us at the

North end of the seven-hundred-foot driveway was a very odd assortment of small black and white buildings in various states of repair. The structure that was the “cottage” perched on a bluff that dropped to the river. Halfway down, CNR owned a two-hundred-foot strip with train tracks.

Below the rails, a tiny triangle of Trent River waterfront was part of the property. Despite the collection of buildings, the piece was priced as vacant land. All these features were clearly visible as we stopped and put the car in park at the south end of the driveway. Rick stepped out, and I opened my door and put one foot out, stretching up to look around.

After about thirty seconds, Rick said, “Let's go.” I was about to pull myself back into the vehicle when I glanced across the roof of the car and met Rick's gaze. I believe our decision was made at that moment.

I said, “Let’s take a quick look around since we’re here. Mom and Dad's place must be somewhere over across the river.” In fact, their place was almost directly across from us. We began to realize that the property was actually tailor-made for our purposes. The fact that it came with a well *and* septic system *and* hydro *and* a place to live while we built that was a notch or two up from a tent made it almost perfect.

We started the bidding process immediately the next morning, but, as it turned out, it was a year and a half before we were able to sell in the city and move. We held our breath, hoping no one would see the virtues of this gorgeous piece of land as we waited. Every time we visited, we noticed something else. There wasn't just the Trent River to look at. The rolling hills of Northumberland County stretched to the east, south, and west.

A ravine with a babbling brook cut across one corner of the field, and wildflowers and birds I had never seen or perhaps never noticed before abounded. The neighbours to the east had a few blond cattle that stood at the fence and dolefully looked in on us. On the west side was a hay field and a century-old

cemetery that was a delightful place to walk and browse the inscriptions on the headstones.

At the driveway entrance to the South was Alfie and Isabel's place. They came out to greet us each time we were up to look at our pending purchase. They considered themselves guardians of the place and weren't too sure about us. We wondered how we would relate to them, too. We grew anxious to begin the adventure.

Chapter 3

Selling

Selling a house, especially one you are living in, is an ordeal. I didn't enjoy the next couple of months of keeping our place constantly clean and tidy and still, all the while, feeling anxious that it wouldn't measure up. Our Oshawa house, like most of our homes, was older and somewhat unusual, five factors that limited its market. As we waited for our buyer, the Hastings offer expired, and, discouraged, we gave up for a while on the whole plan. Then, one day, about a year after our initial bid, we thought, why not try again?

To solidify our thoughts and feelings, we drove up to Hastings once more and put our canoe in the water at Stevenson's Marina, a little downriver from the property. It was late afternoon on one of those balmy early November days when the sun's light made everything warm and glowing. We paddled upstream toward the property and the town. The sun began its slide down to the horizon, back-lighting the steeple of the Catholic Church. It was another magical moment of affirmation. This was the place for us. We wrote the offer up ourselves and mailed it off just before Christmas 1984. By New Year, we had a new deal and were planning our move for May 15th.

Another task I undertook, while we waited in Oshawa for our buyer to appear was a little research on the availability of building permits. We had gone ahead with our offer, assuming naively, stupidly, that permits would be no problem. I wrote to Percy Township Council and asked about our land specifically. I was surprised to receive a letter back from Win Platt, the Clerk, saying that we may or may not be granted a permit.

She, accompanied by the whole council, would have to visit the site and consider the issue of no frontage on an open township road. It usually meant no building permit. We were fortunate,

though, because the end of our driveway just barely caught the corner of Cemetery Road. Ironically, the main reason for the open road stipulation was to allow the school bus access to pick up the kids. Our girls were homeschooled.

The winter before we moved, Rick and I took a continuing education course at Durham College on building your own home. It focused largely on energy conservation. I learned quite a bit, but I was starting from zero. Rick already knew much of the material. However, the textbook “Designing and Building Your Own House Your Own Way" by Sam Clark was invaluable to us as we built.

Perhaps because, at that point, I’d do anything to make the move go smoothly, I agreed to Tanya’s demand for a dog. I obediently called the number. “What colour are your boxer pups?” I don’t know why I wanted to know. I was pretty surprised when she said there was a white one, not an albino, just white.

The breeders normally put them down to get the white gene out of the boxer breed. Instead, this lady was selling hers for about a third of the price of her fawn-coloured dogs. The odd-looking white pup came home with us that day, and we all moved to Hastings a few weeks later.

Because there was enough left from the sale of our Oshawa house to build our new house, we didn't need a mortgage. One of the advantages of not involving the bank in our deal was the fact that I could search the title myself and do all the other tasks usually performed by the lawyer's secretary. It would save a little money, but mostly, I expected to enjoy the job as I had once in the past when we bought a vacation property.

Once we had our buyers, I realized I had a problem. The lawyer acting on behalf of the buyers passionately disapproved of do-it-yourselfers. He refused to talk to me, answering the phone with a loud "Get yourself a lawyer," followed by a slamming down of the receiver. From there, he did all he could to sabotage

the deal until the real estate agent begged us to hire a lawyer to save her commission.

We compromised by hiring a paralegal, which was a new job description in Ontario in those days. Even then, on the eve of our ten am appointment to close the deal, after five when offices closed, our paralegal called to tell me, in a beaten tone of voice, that the buyer's lawyer was demanding a signature from the owners previous to us. “You've been there eight years. I assume you don't know how to reach the Bucklers. So I guess we won't close tomorrow. I'm sorry.”

I laughed a little hysterically. I did know exactly where the Bucklers were. We had kept in touch. Amazingly, they lived just a couple of blocks from the uncooperative lawyer’s office. They were willing and able to drop in and sign at nine the next morning. And we closed on time!

Chapter 4

Moving Day

Moving day began early, around five in the morning. I leapt out of my bed on the floor at a friend's house in the neighbourhood and ran outside. My first thought was for Sophie, our frail, old cat. I had phoned the buyer the night before and asked if the cat could stay in the house this last night to spare her the stress of moving twice, to the neighbour's and then to Hastings in as many days. I assured him I would have her out bright and early. He said, "No, I've had enough." I didn't know what else to do, so I left Sophie there anyway.

I could see that the new owners' moving trucks were coming down the road. They were still several hundred feet from the house, and trees partially hid me from them.

I ran down to the house to get there before they did. I let myself in and locked the door behind me. Fortunately, Sophie was easy to find. I picked up the litter box along with the cat and ran out the back door, locking it behind me. I ran back along the beach to the neighbour's. Though Sophie hadn't travelled much, she didn't mind me plopping her into the car. We were ready to leave.

We pulled into the long driveway two hours later, still early, on that mid-May morning in 1985: Rick and I, our three daughters, two dogs, and two cats, with all our worldly possessions packed into a yellow moving van and a red Volvo.

Our place was an interesting property that no one else seemed to want. It had been sitting unsold for several years. Numerous structures seemed to grow out of the ground, scattered about, all made of packing crates and other makeshift materials. Besides buildings, our land boasted an old farm wagon rotting into the dirt, three leaning posts that once formed a baseball diamond of sorts, and a fire hydrant hooked into nothing.

The main building was a series of lean-tos that became a cottage. Most of the rooms overlooked other rooms and even had windows opening into them. The ceilings exceeded six feet but not by much, and some walls were purple. “Home for the next few months,” I thought.

All around us was a carpet of yellow mustard flowers and the chortle of bobolinks accompanied by the song of orioles. Our spirits were high as we began to unpack even though the cottage sat fully furnished, awaiting our stuff, and the various sheds, outhouses, and garages were all piled to the rafters with tools, furniture, and vehicles that we'd acquired as part of the deal.

"Hmm, where to put our stuff?” I wondered.

Clouds moved in, and Rick left to return the yellow van and bring back his motorcycle.

Chapter 5

Breaking Ground

We were eager to break ground immediately the next day, but first, we had to see the building inspector for our permits. I was nervous because our design was a bit unconventional. I brought along a scale model of the house that I'd made of cardboard to show the inspector. A friend was doing drawings for us, but so far, he'd only done the basement. It didn't occur to us that the inspector would want to see them. As with so many aspects of this project, we were blessed with good fortune. The building inspector turned out to be a kindred spirit. After brushing aside my model, he pronounced that anyone should be able to build the house they want where they want and promptly gave us the permit, stipulating only that we should bring the drawings in to go on file when we got them. We never saw him again, and our friend's drawings never caught up with the building process. Our house was never inspected, which suited the anarchist in me just fine.

The next step before we could get hands-on with construction was to have a hole dug. Rick had to work in the city a couple of days a week to feed us, so that left me and the girls to oversee the digging. Carrie, the youngest at nine, helped me mark the corners for the excavator. We went out at dusk with a tape measure, string, and some stakes. It took a while and lots of pulling up and pounding down of stakes to get it absolutely square. The mosquitoes were feasting on us before we were done, but we were driven by the knowledge that Rick couldn't live in an out-of-square house. Carrie ended up overseeing Mr. Brunton and his digging machine.

I had an appointment, and the older girls had decided to go to school. All three had been home-schooled up until then. Rick was still at work in the city. I came back from my appointment to find

the property transformed. A few feet from the packing crate/cottage was a deep hole surrounded by mountains of dirt and a pile of boulders, some as big as one of the sheds. I drove to town and bought a bottle of wine. After supper, I took it and two glasses and climbed to the top of the largest dirt pile to wait for Rick to return.

While I sat peacefully surveying my new home, my neighbour, Alfie, drove up the driveway and offered to buy the old Allis Chalmers tractor that was in one of the garages. I'd never negotiated the sale of a tractor, especially while seated on top of a pile of dirt, looking down at the buyer. We agreed on a price. Then he informed me, "As long as you know, I'm going to turn around and sell it for quite a bit more."

"Okay," I said.

Just then, I felt that life couldn't get much better than that.

Chapter 6

Tornado

During construction, a shack, euphemistically called a cottage, kept us dry. A tornado came in our second week in Hastings. I'd never experienced one before but was terrified by what I had heard of them. The idea of my house spinning off to some strange land left me afraid of The Wizard of Oz story for life.

It was Friday afternoon, about 4:00. We were driving the girls into town to sign up for baseball. We could have let them walk the two kilometres, but we were taking the laundry into the laundromat, so they came along. We dropped them off at the baseball diamond and went down the street to put our washing in several machines. They cycled through their process and were finishing up when I noticed it was getting darker in the room.

It had been an unremarkable day weather-wise. I went to look out the front windows of the laundromat. “Rick,” I called. “Come and see. The atmosphere’s all green.” He came and looked, and then we looked at each other. We both knew what that green sky meant, although neither of us had ever seen it. It was a very unusual green, like teal. “Where do we go for shelter?” I asked Rick, somewhat rhetorically. In a few minutes, we decided we had best try to get home because the dogs and cats were there.

We abandoned our laundry in the washers and rushed to the car to pick up the girls. Driving across the bridge, we could see the water churning in the river, responding to the erratic westerly winds. At the other end of the bridge, we turned left onto Water Street and were about to pass the cement factory, where there was a row of three metal-roofed storage sheds, all open to the road at one end and apparently used to store aggregates for making cement. One of them was empty. Rick thought for a moment that it might make a good place to wait out the storm and protect the

newly painted car from wind and probable hailstones. However, we thought again of the animals and hurried home.

We got there, and the dogs were glad to see us. The wind was howling as it ripped past us, and hail had indeed arrived. I went inside and picked up our motorcycle helmets, hoping that they might protect our heads as we struggled to cover the Volvo with a heavy canvas tarp. We finally succeeded and turned to go back into the cottage. We weren't at the door yet when I glanced back to see the tarp sailing off to the neighbours east of us.

Once we were inside, things suddenly seemed a little quieter. Outside the big back room window, I could see bits of dirt and leaves suspended in mid-air. Now, an eerie light prevailed—not the green of the pre-tornado time but a light that looked (perhaps felt would be a better word) like a vacuum. I assumed we were in the eye of the tornado. The wind picked up again, and then it stopped. We looked around first at each other, then at our stuff and, lastly, at the forms that were awaiting the pouring of our basement walls on Monday morning.

There was no damage. A canoe had arrived from somewhere, but we never found its owner. To our immense delight, a vivid rainbow arched over the forms of the new house basement. (The moment, but not the rainbow, is captured on the back cover of this book). We drove back to town to pick up the laundry and had supper at Boondocks, our favourite local restaurant. On our way to town, we passed the cement sheds again. The empty one was now full. Its steel roof had collapsed into it with the wind. We had made a good choice going home.

Chapter 7

Visitors

Visitors were a major distraction from the serious business of getting our house sufficiently weatherproof to give us shelter from winter's blast. The packing crate cottage would not do. I was moving over on October 31st—no later, no matter what. However, people kept coming, at least through the summer months, and we kept putting down the tools to make coffee or drinks or a meal. It wasn't in me to send them away.

The first official local visitor dropped in a week after we arrived. Dave was a neighbour who lived down the road halfway to town with his wife Darla and two daughters. He drove up the driveway one evening when Rick was working in Oshawa and hopped out of his pickup carrying a dead chicken and two beers. Handing me the bird, he said it was a welcome gift for me from Darla. Then, he asked if Rick was around to have a beer with him. When I said no, he sat down in the purple living room and drank both bottles himself while we chatted. Apparently, in his world, women didn't drink beer. I was amused but really could have enjoyed one at that moment in time.

Other neighbours dropped by to check on our progress. They lent us tools and came up with materials and, of course, advice. Alfie and Isabel lived at the end of our driveway, where he operated a metal fabricating shop and a towing service; he also wheeled and dealt in car sales. Rick's perfectionism made him laugh. One day, he sat on a lawn chair half the afternoon watching as Rick squared up the walls on the first floor with a block and tackle supplied by Alfie. "Something it says to do in the book, Rick?" he asked, chuckling.

Alfie and Isabel had three dogs…only one of them friendly. Pokey was old and stayed home while her son Brownie ran about, causing some trouble. One day, a few weeks after our arrival, he

dashed out at Carrie on her bicycle and sunk his teeth into her calf; she still has a very visible scar. Then there was Smokey, who immediately visited us and befriended Roxy, our boxer pup. He brought her a dead groundhog and taught her to hunt her own. Roxy became obsessed with killing groundhogs and would slaughter them, littering the lawn with corpses. Rick had to interrupt his work at a time when Roxy wasn't around to see, maybe her suppertime, and dig graves for the unfortunate rodents. Then he would walk in circles so she couldn't retrace his steps and dig them up again.

A neighbour adjacent to the graveyard brought over his wheelbarrow and left it with us for the duration of our project. On his first visit, he stipulated that he didn't like to be invited; he would just drop by spontaneously when the mood struck him, and we were to do the same. “This is the country,” he pointed out, “not formal like what you're used to in the city.” He also had instructions as to how to pronounce his name, Bernard. We were to say *Ber*nard, not Ber*nard*.

Townspeople would stop as they passed, curious about the building that was starting to be visible for long distances from across the river and looking down from the three heights of land that surrounded us.

A neighbour walked down across his fields and wandered into our meadow ostensibly to welcome us. I soon realized, however, that his real purpose was to educate us on the need to eradicate our thistles. He told us that they were a problem in that their seeds rode the wind up to his fields, causing his cattle some unspecified difficulties. As he spoke, he showed us that breaking the tall stems in half at flowering time was all we needed to do to prevent the plant from going to seed. As long as I've known of the existence of an interior weed control act, I've been offended by it, and while I didn't wish this man's cattle any ill, I had no intention of depriving the goldfinches or their favourite snack. Besides, I loved looking at the towering magenta blooms. Being vegetarian,

it was okay with me if the neighbour gave up raising cattle. He only visited once.

Then there were the invited guests, some of them regulars. The Elles usually came with a camper trailer and stayed the weekend with two kids. My sister Clara and her partner Marcia camped in a rented RV for a week with four kids and a large dog. Most of our friends made the trip for at least one meal. My parents often enjoyed coffee on our living room floor before it had walls.

There is a horror story. I invited a homeschooling friend for an afternoon. I'd known her for about five years, chatted for long stretches on the phone, and met her several times at gatherings. She came with her husband and daughter, and they stayed for dinner. We talked through the afternoon about homesteading, house building, Scott Nearing, and such because they intended to relocate to Killaloo in the Ottawa Valley, a village known for its hippies and homeschoolers. They did, in fact, move. Sometime later, the news came back that she had murdered him. They had separated, and she bought him a bottle of wine and laced it with antifreeze. After taking it to his house, she went home and phoned him, keeping him up drinking it all night until he died. The lurid story goes on to include a lesbian lover, a teenage boy, and another murder. I just couldn't believe we had entertained this person in our peaceful, light filled space. The house, however, didn't seem to retain any traces of darkness.

Overall, despite the interruptions in the work schedule, we had fun showing off our project to visitors.

Chapter 8

Unschooling

Our kids quit school early. In Carrie's case, it was right after kindergarten. The principal wanted her to repeat because she was only three, and she hadn't watched much Sesame Street. We didn't want her to experience what was perceived in the school system as "failure" at such a young age. Soon, the other girls followed Carrie's example. I had read about homeschooling in Harrowsmith magazine and was interested because I'd always hated school. I didn't realize that children actually learn to read the same way they learn to talk, by imitation. If they live with readers and are exposed to books, they will learn regardless of whether they are taught.

Our style of homeschooling was called "unschooling" by the homeschooling community, which simply means the child spends their days doing whatever they want to with their time. There is no curriculum, no timetable. Learning does not start at 9 am and continue until 3 pm. It happens all year long, summer and winter. I found that the school bureaucracy felt it was fine to take your child sailing around the world for a year, and for that, they would provide learning materials and any help they could offer. However, if you were going to teach your child at home, that would not do. You got no support from them.

We did what we felt like with our days. We did not have a room set aside as a classroom, nor did we do any busywork or have any formal learning time. We did do field trips to places like the local rare breeds farm, New York City, and various musical events. The girls were limited to about an hour of TV a day, and they often didn't watch that much anyway.

It was probably fortunate that the Ministry of Education was as neglectful as the municipality in carrying out their inspections. In the ten years that we unschooled our daughters, we never had to

suffer an inspection. Once, a truant officer came around without notice. We were out, and he left a message saying that he'd been scared off by the vicious pug, but he would be back. He never did return.

I felt that the experience of helping to build a home was at least as valuable as any gained sailing. School curricula are always years behind real life and, with the rate of change speeding up, that is only going to get worse. The important thing, as far as I could see, was to avoid knocking the desire to learn out of the girls. If we managed to do that, the curriculum didn't matter. All three girls went to high school, and two went on to college and graduated. They had no trouble getting jobs when the time came.

Attendance at school should at least not be compulsory. How do you teach children that they are free in Canada when they have to be in a classroom all day sitting at a desk with no choice? Never again in the child's life are they likely to experience being confined to a room with 20 or 30 other kids, all the same age and the same socioeconomic background—in other words, a ghetto. And most teachers have only been in school, never experiencing life beyond the walls of a school.

Everyone worries about homeschooled kids and their social life. In fact, almost without exception, the kids I've met who don't go to school are better socialized than the ones who do. They are confident and comfortable in many situations that would make me nervous. Not having to send the girls off to school every morning simplified all of our lives, and, of course, we enjoyed having them around.

Chapter 9

The Auction

Rick was gone Tuesday nights working in Oshawa. Tuesdays were auction night in Hastings, and while the kids visited friends, I would go off to the auction hall on the other side of town on foot or on my bicycle. The experience was new to me and very entertaining. In addition, I picked up quite a few items for our building project, including the kitchen sink. Les, the auctioneer, did his rapid-fire babble while customizing it a little for each sale. This was easy as he knew his hall full of bidders on a first-name basis.

My mother was a favourite, mainly because she could be counted on to bid on anything and everything that appeared to be a good deal. One Tuesday, she was the only bidder, consequently the buyer of a three-foot piece of brass. She didn't know what it was, but she remained undismayed to discover that she had bought a sand point for a well. She had no need for it, but it only cost a dollar. “How could you pass up a deal like that?” she told us.

Then, there was the time I was stuck in the back corner behind everyone else in a packed hall. I had looked over the items being auctioned and decided I really wanted the sundial with its concrete pedestal. Les started the bidding at ten dollars. I shot up my hand, displaying my card with its number. Then, someone I couldn't see bid $12 in the front corner of the crowd. I bid $15. From there, Les drew bids from me and my anonymous competitor in one-dollar increments. The other bidder quit at $25, and the sundial was mine. I wondered why Les found this item such fun to sell as he grinned from ear to ear throughout the bidding. This became clear as I met my mother on my way out of the hall, and she exclaimed, “Oh, you bought the sundial. I was bidding on it because I knew you wanted one.”

Getting stuff, the three kilometres home was sometimes a problem. Everything had to be cleared out that night. I could manage quite a bit on my bike or walking, but not things like our double-sized plywood bed with big drawers underneath. I especially loved the miscellaneous boxes that were always put up for sale at the end and usually for not much more than a dollar. I'd be delighted to win the bidding on a box with something like an unusual plate that I'd spotted before the sale started. Then, I'd get back to the cottage and go through the rest of the carton. Sometimes, although not every time, I discovered a second treasure. One of these prizes was Tolstoy’s “Essays on Life.”

While the auction never really lost its entertainment value for me, there came a time when I had to find something else to do with my Tuesday evenings. If I went to the auction, it was too tempting to bid on books and paintings, and we already had everything we needed and more.

Chapter 10

Help

I assumed I would be an equal partner with Rick when it came to building our house. I soon had to modify that expectation. There was the fact that I didn't have much knowledge or experience in building. I thought I knew far more than I actually did, having taken the course with Rick in energy-efficient construction, and up to this point, my contribution had been substantial and significant.

While we were still in Oshawa, I pored over several alternative house-building books and came up with a design that Rick refined and improved. Then, I made a list of materials we needed and priced everything right down to nails. As moving day neared, I lined up people to dig our basement and pour the concrete for the foundation and walls.

To get some sense as to whether my figures were in the ballpark, I called Canada Mortgage and Housing and asked what the current (1983) per square foot cost was on new house construction. Their rep told me it was about $75, but that amount could vary widely. For instance, he said the kitchen might cost $2,000, but it might also cost $20,000. *“Ours will be $200,”* I thought but didn’t say out loud. I was pretty confident of my calculations and sure that we would end up paying $25 to $30 a square foot. The house was to be 1120 square feet. One big difference, of course, between CMHC prices and mine was that mine didn't include any labour except for the contracted bits, which we figured would likely be just the basement.

We hadn't asked anyone to help and hadn't even considered that we might need help. As it turned out, help was thrust upon us by concerned and interested friends and relatives. This was where I had to fight to maintain my primary involvement. First, there was Rick H, a neighbour from Oshawa. Rick H arrived and

announced he would be pitching a tent and helping us build during his long stretches off work at the nuclear power plant. His six am arrival jolted us awake since the main entrance to the cottage doubled as the master bedroom. There he was, standing a few feet from the bottom of our bed, pounding on the glass door and staring in at us.

In many ways, Rick H was an asset to any building project. He possessed genius along with myriad skills, and he worked at lightning speed. In fact, before he left that morning, he had our hot water tank hooked up and running. However, he did not understand our philosophy around this undertaking—a shared family adventure resulting in a somewhat alternative house. He was very intense and opinionated, and his idea of my role was that of a housekeeper in the cottage and babysitter when he brought his daughter and son along.

It was Rick's five-year-old boy who gave this memoir its name. He asked his dad, "Is this house tornado-proof because we're using fresh nails?"

Our other major help came from my bachelor brother-in-law, who lived in Scarborough with his parents. Bob feared for us that fall, and then winter would come, and we'd be huddled in the packing crate/cottage with the house nowhere near livable. He began to arrive on Friday evening, staying until Sunday supper time, sleeping on the couch in the purple living room. Bob also possessed skills, and he, like his brother Rick, was clever and innovative.

I was beginning to feel excluded from my own adventure, and there were a few scenes. A major disruption occurred when Rick H brought the kids around for the first time, and I let him know I would not be minding them. He left in a huff and didn't return for weeks. After that, he just appeared out of the blue at a couple of critical junctures. He rolled up the driveway as we were about to put the steel on the roof and again as I was leaving to buy what

we needed to sand the drywall. We were grateful for his help on these jobs.

Meanwhile, Bob had somehow caught on that I was feeling crowded out, and he graciously began arriving later on Saturday morning and only staying one night. I found it worked best if I left him and Rick alone with the work for that 24-hour period of each week. There was still a little tension, however, as Bob didn't always approve of how I spent my time while he and Rick hammered and sawed. I went for frequent walks along the railway tracks beside the river and studied the wild herbs and flowers that grew in incredible variety around our acreage.

I encouraged Bob to do what Rick usually did when he was leaving to work in Oshawa—assign me a task that was within my capabilities that I could work away at and complete before he returned. Once in a while he did. One job was attaching all the wires in the electrical boxes. This was fun because I had never done anything remotely electrical before in spite of growing up an electrical engineer’s daughter. Rick would leave me with a wall framework to cut and put together or nails to put in the sheets of sub-flooring. I was gradually learning what house building was really about.

The girls did their part, too, usually willingly and cheerfully. They put the black sealant on the basement walls, stained boards and battens and later helped Rick H mud and sand the drywall, among other things. They made grilled cheese sandwiches for us on Sundays at lunch, usually around 2:00, because Bob and Rick liked to eat late. When it rained, it always seemed to be Carrie's and my job to get out the brooms and sweep the water that pooled on the sub-flooring into the basement. The girls did regular household chores like taking out the garbage and washing dishes.

During this time, the two older girls, Tanya and Grace, usually went to school at Campbellford District High School. Carrie stayed home for another few years. When there was a special push on or a job that needed extra bodies, like raising a wall, we

managed to schedule those events for times when a crowd was coming for an afternoon or the weekend. No one seemed to mind being part of our house-raising. In the end, we had just the right amount of help, just when we needed it, to still be able to say we built it ourselves, although I think “ourselves” would have to include Bob.

Rick hand lettered and framed a Certificate thanking Bob for all his efforts on our behalf. We all signed it and gave it to him for Christmas. He seemed thrilled and cherished it for many years after.

Chapter 11

Building Materials

We built our house back in 1985. A lot of unconventional building materials, many used, made it into our project. In fact, we included so much pre-owned stuff in our house that people would ask when we had done the renovations. One friend said he'd be hugely insulted if someone mistook his brand-new house for a reno. However, I was always flattered that our place looked lived in.

In one of our books, we read about faux board and batten siding. Our 2 x 6 studs were on two-foot centres, which called for five-eights inch plywood sheathing. We put this up and then spaced out battens directly on the plywood so that it looked like boards. This took the place of Tentest sheathing, which saved a few dollars. I got the staining job, staining as we went along a light blue-grey colour. Rick always regretted the colour, thinking we had chosen a neutral grey.

I shudder to remember my stupidity one day when I was alone at the house. I decided to stain, and what needed doing was the east gable end upstairs. I set up the ladder and did all I could reach. Then, I extended the ladder all the way, further than the instructions said was safe. They also said not to stand on the top rung. I climbed all the way up and stood on tip-toe on the top rung, reached up, stretched, and dabbed a bit of colour in the peak, all the while thinking that I was being thorough instead of idiotic. The incident haunts me.

A major example of our used materials was our downstairs floor. It was pumpkin pine, over an inch thick, pulled out of a century home in Belleville by a local scrap dealer. Cleaning up the tongue and groove was major work for Rick, but the end result was beautiful. It got fairly beaten up by our dogs, but we loved it anyway.

Rick made all the window and door trim on his table saw. He also built the kitchen cupboards and shelves. Shelves were all we had above the counter, which was what allowed us to have a kitchen for $200 instead of the $2000 rock bottom kitchen envisioned by CMHC. We thought the open shelves were beautiful—much more attractive than cupboards.

Some of the wood for the cupboards and other things came from parts of the cottage as we tore it down. The kitchen sink was an auction find, as was our beautiful 1930s electric stove. It came from the Anglican church auction for $25 delivered. The island in the kitchen included wood from the cottage demo, trim made from the pine flooring and the leaves from Rick's grandmother's maple kitchen table upon which his brother Bob had been born.

Walls in the kitchen were panelling discarded from a friends house that we painted to suit our decor.

We used the bathtub from the cottage, which was in perfect condition. It was set up with the tap end at the front wall, which was barely four feet tall, and most people couldn't stand there. Hence, the shower was at the back end of the tub with the higher ceiling. I had to design a shower curtain that ran downhill. Also at that end was a bench with a lid opening to a laundry chute to the machine directly below. We bought the tiles for the tub surround and sink counter and walls new. They were four inches square and gloss black with matte black grout. They looked spectacular and still do 30 years later.

We did the upstairs ceilings with knotty pine tongue and groove panelling applied by Carrie and I. Rick built scaffolding so we could reach. Downstairs, in the kitchen and dining room, we had locally milled pine beams four by eight inches. They were not inspected and not graded. They supported the second story which was an L shape with our bedroom across the east end, the bathroom, Carries little room (eight feet by twelve) and what we called the gallery. This was a little hall and landing at the top of the stairs with just enough room for an Andrew Wyeth print on

the wall. Our bedroom wall had a large opening with shutters overlooking the living room below.

Our windows were new. Curtains for the big living room corner windows came from the auction and those for all the smaller windows I crocheted from white cotton yarn. New materials were delivered in the big Cashway truck by Lin, their regular driver. I think he may have had a bit of a crush on Tanya.

Chapter 12

Cottage Life

We actually were able to make ourselves comfortable for the summer in our packing crate. The kitchen worked. It had a small, old electric stove, a shallow sink, a fridge, and a hot water tank, as well as an old oil space heater. There were a few shelves laden with dishes, cutlery, and pots so that I didn't have to unpack mine. Besides cooking regular meals for a family of five that tended to eat out at the smallest excuse, I was even able to make a couple of preserves from my newly discovered wild plants. The one I remember best was Mayapple marmalade. The recipe came from Euell Gibbons' book Stalking The Wild Asparagus—very tasty.

The phone hung on the kitchen wall. It demanded a bit of behavioural adjustment from us city folk because Bell had assigned us a party line. When it rang, you didn't just rush to answer it; you listened and counted the rings—one long and two short. Then, of course, if you wanted to call out, you always checked, quietly lifting the receiver to see if the other party, whose identity was a mystery, wasn't using the line. Fortunately, with two teens and a preteen in our house, our party rarely seemed to need the phone.

Also, the three-piece bathroom worked, although it was an odd shape—nine or ten feet long and only about three feet wide. The tub always beckoned in the late afternoon after I'd worked all day in the heat. In fact, the tub was in such good shape that we used it in the new house.

Other items turned out to be keepers, too: a lovely little hooked rug, various antique dishes, and a large, solid wooden box that became our stereo cabinet while we built and remains today, our firewood storage in the living room.

The weather was good to us overall, making it easier to live in such ugly and close quarters. We played and worked outside most

of the time. We had a TV with an aerial. Bob had given us a VCR, so in bad weather, there were movies to rent in town. Sometimes, we even lit a fire in the Franklin store, which made the purple living room almost cozy, if a little scary. Tanya and Grace's bedroom was in the centre of the cottage and had a window you could open to the living room. They usually kept it closed and the curtains drawn. Since it was the only window in either room, both were quite dark night or day. One evening, we had returned from visiting somewhere. The girls had gone into their room to get ready for bed. Moments later, terrified screams issued from the bedroom. Rick and I rushed in to witness a little light flashing on and off, first here and then there and then there and there—a firefly.

Over the summer, we entertained often. Friends came for meals or the weekend—sometimes even longer, with tents and trailers. We took time to visit with them with no thought to our casual building schedule. In those summer days and weeks, we felt we had all the time in the world as the frame of the house took shape. We weren't cluing into the fact that the frame was the easy, quick part.

Reality began to close in on us around Labour Day. I said more than once that I was moving into the new house no later than Halloween, regardless of what shape it was in. That left 61 days to do the slow finishing work. In the meantime, we moved a couple of functions out of the cottage to the house. Once the sub-floor was laid in what was to be the living room, we'd set a table up there for company meals. Also, the west wall of the house was only three feet from our master bedroom, cum front entrance in the cottage. As soon as there was a sub-floor upstairs and there was a small section of steel roofing attached, we moved our bed over and tore that room off the cottage; this gave more room for working on that end of the house and provided much better sleeps most of the time.

Chapter 12, Cottage Life

I was beginning to write for magazines when we moved, and my first sale was an article I wrote and then typed on a manual typewriter in the room in the packing crate that we called the dining room. We called it that because our dining room table was squeezed in under the window, and we occasionally ate at it. However, it was more like a back hall exit from the cottage. A huge picture window was filled with the river and the rolling hills on the opposite shore. The view was breathtaking. Whenever I was down about life in the cottage, I only had to remind myself that the vista from the dining room window and others just as uplifting would fill every window in our new house.

Chapter 13

Trains

When we first looked at the property where we would build our dream home, we were curious about the trains and the easement that ran along our waterfront. We knew it was an active rail line because Carrie, at her grandpa's suggestion, had placed a penny on the rail. The following week, when we came for a second inspection there, it was flattened.

Over time, we ascertained that our train ran irregularly, but usually, it came by around 10:00 am on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and back again near 10 at night on the same days. I never knew what the long line of boxcars contained, but it probably wasn't much because the trips dwindled down from three to two a weekend, then just one. By the time we were in the house for a year, there were no more trains.

The rails were on a ledge halfway down the 80-foot drop to the river from the elevation where the house stood. That put us looking down on the roof of the boxcars. We would wave at the engineers, and they would toot the horn back at us. Often, there was a caboose to wave at as well. I'll never forget the image of a late evening train returning during a heavy snowfall. Its bright headlamp lit up the woods as it wended its way through the trees and along the river. We watched the magical scene from our unfinished living room, curled up on the couch with a bottle of wine.

There was a terrifying aspect to having the train so near to us. The risk was always imminent that someone might get hit. In fact, two people in a car were killed at the crossing nearest us just before we moved there. I was greatly concerned that our white boxer pup would have a fatal run-in with the train.

Roxy would hear the train coming towards us and run down the path to the tracks. Then, off she'd go like a bullet straight

down between the rails toward the locomotive that was bearing down on her. As soon as she realized it was coming her way and gaining ground, she'd reverse direction and race back the way she had come. Unfortunately, she wasn't bright enough to realize that she should get off the track, that she didn't have to wait until she was back all the way to the path up to the house.

There was less warning when the little gas carts came by on the rails, and Roxy loved to race them. They had no schedule and made little noise. We only saw them occasionally and presumed they were doing maintenance. One man ran the cart, and he'd pass our place at about 100 kilometres an hour, it seemed to me. The driver would be a little spooked when this white, four-legged apparition would appear beside him, breezing along with a smile on her face.

We took a family vacation in the autumn of 1986, a year after we had moved into the house. Roxy and the other animals were left in the care of a house sitter. I presented her with a small book I'd written, three or four typed single-spaced pages in which I tried to convey my fears for Roxy and the train and all the various sensory alerts to watch and listen for that announced it's coming from far away. The sitter read my pages and was confused. No train came the whole time we were away. Then there was just one more after we returned.

CN tore up the rails and the ties, and the easement became a recreational trail. We used the trail regularly to walk or ski to town. We had done that when the train ran, too, but not having to measure steps to the spacing of the ties made it a more pleasant walk. I acquired a few of the ties from the workers who were digging them up. They formed walls for some raised beds in my garden.

We missed the train. I took some time to adjust to its loss—no more horn sounds, no more friendly waves, no more locomotive charging by, and no more clickety-clack of the endless boxcar

wheels going around on the rails. Trains had been a part of the charm of our little homestead.

Chapter 14

Heat

Whenever the opportunity arose, my dad never failed to mention that our new house lacked a heating system. He didn't credit the wood-stove as being anything but aesthetic. A heating system, in his experience, involved duct-work for forced air or pipes and radiators in the case of hot water heat. We planned to have a medium-sized airtight wood stove as our main heat source and an oil furnace as backup. As it turned out, we put off getting the backup in place over and over again until we were quite used to just having wood heat. Our lifestyle suited it well in that Rick stayed up very late, and I got up early so we could keep the stove running most of the time. Only occasionally did we suffer frigid mornings.

The first stove we purchased was from a dealer in Peterborough; it was a pretty little red-enamelled Efel from Europe. However, it was missing a crucial part that took August until December to get to us. Meanwhile, foolishly, we had paid for the stove in full, and it sat in the living room inoperable while we shivered. Our only bit of warmth came from two or three electric space heaters loaned to us by Rick's uncle Charlie. For a few days, we moved the Franklin over from the cottage and hooked it up—another mistake in our heating adventure.

Rick lit a small fire in the Franklin one Saturday morning, and soon, we heard a *"Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!"* sound filling up the living room, a bit like a steam locomotive coming. We all—Rick, Bob, and I—stared at each other as we slowly came to the realization that we had a chimney fire. All we could do about it was close the loose, floppy doors on the old stove and pray. It stopped.

Between August and December, the store in Peterborough could do nothing but laugh at our predicament. When the part

finally did come in, it was the wrong part. We immediately put the Efel into the car and drove it back to Peterborough. We demanded our money back or a new functioning stove. He gave us a good solid stove after he removed all the fancy bits, like the gold trim on the doors. We took it home, installed it, and lived with it happily ever after. We came to realize our good fortune in that the Efel would not have been big enough.

Our floor plan, along with a ceiling fan was exceptionally good for spreading the heat around. This fact, I believe, was accidental, at least a little. The heat from the cathedral ceiling came up through the space we left at the top of Carrie's bedroom wall as well as up through the cutout in our bedroom wall that overlooked the living room. This left the bedrooms upstairs toasty and downstairs not too hot.

We had one small, hardwired baseboard heater in the bathroom. When we were away for a day, or a little more than a day, we turned it on and stuck all the plants in there. Even on the coldest winter days, the house did not freeze up.

We purchased our firewood from local dealers, some of which were terrible curmudgeons. Dealing with firewood and firewood dealers requires care and study. Our regular dealer sold us good wood at reasonable prices, sometimes underestimating the size of a bush cord and occasionally overestimating it. If you complained, you got swear words hurled at you. Not all dealers did business in this manner, and we now have one that brings good wood and doesn't call Rick names. We usually burned about four bush cords cut and split, and Rick would split it all again into smaller pieces before stacking it. I liked to do the stacking. A well-stacked pile of firewood makes you warm just by looking at it.

I think my father always found himself very comfortable in our house despite the fact that he thought it lacked a heating system.

Chapter 15

The Well

We had a house—four walls and a roof over our heads. I was grateful for that. I moved over to the new structure on Halloween. It should have been a bigger celebration, but we were out of the packing crate, and I was happy. The problem now, and it was a big one, was that we had no water. The well wasn't as wonderful as the real estate agent had led us to believe. It was supposed to be almost a hundred feet deep, but when we got around to working on it, we found it to be only 50-feet deep. The water tasted good and was sulphur and salt-free. However, we discovered that it contained nitrates, which can cause a type of anemia in babies under six months old. This contaminant is common in the country and comes from farmers' fields when it rains. Another reason not to eat meat, I figured.

Our plan was to draw water into the house from the well in two plastic pipes, the pump in the basement pulling. We called an excavator, who came and dug the trench we needed to bury the water pipes. At the same time, he dug all around the house, conducting a search for our septic tank. He did not find it—more exaggeration on the part of the real estate agent. The excavator left us with foot-deep trenches crisscrossing our "lawn" on three sides of the house. Each hole had a mountain of dirt beside it. It was a mess and required a board leading from the front door across the first trench, which led to the car. It was scary walking across it, especially at night.

It took a while to sink in, but we eventually realized that the excavator had not made sure his trench had no hills in it, that it was absolutely level so that the water did not encounter an airlock as it made its way to the house. Rick and Bob began the tortuous job of getting the water flowing. It was a cold, miserable early November, and we had no water, which, of course, meant no

bathing, no toilet, no water for cooking. Add to this the wood stove sitting idle, awaiting its part, and we were in miserable shape.

Trying to get the pump primed, Rick and Bob sat on upturned plastic crates, leaning over the pump and pouring water into it again and again and again. Each time, they'd mutter things like, "This time, it will hold. We've got it this time." While upstairs, the girls and I held our collective breath as the pump ran for a minute, maybe even two, and then petered out. The basement was a cold place, and unfortunately, Rick and Bob were patient men. They shared the character trait that cost them two weeks of working in the cold for nothing.

Finally, they decided our only option was to move the pump to the well and push the water to the house instead of pulling it. We wouldn't need two water pipes, and the hills in the trench would make no difference. The pump would need an electrical connection so the second pipe in the trench could carry a wire to the house for plugging it in. Even Rick, the more patient of the brothers, was ready to try something different. After what I'd put up with for two weeks, I had no faith that this would work any better, but I kept my mouth shut.

Bob had an ingenious plan to fish the electrical wire through the hundred feet of the second pipe. After the pump was moved over, he put a small candy in a plastic sandwich bag and tied a hundred feet of string to it at the mouth of the pipe in the well pit. Then, back at the house, he got out the vacuum cleaner and placed the suction hose over the opening of the pipe. He turned on the vacuum, and in a blink of an eye, our problems were solved. The string came through to the house, and then Bob attached the other end to the wire and pulled it through.

We had difficulties with the well going dry a few years after that, but eventually, we deepened it another 50 feet. No greater quantity of water flowed into it. The only aquifer filling it was at the 50-foot level. This meant that we had 50 gallons of water

standing in the cased bottom, which acted as a cistern. Even though we only got a few gallons per hour coming in, there was always this reservoir at the bottom, and we never ran out. When we were selling the house years later, the agent pointed out the numbers on the water test results and said, “This must be a typo. It wouldn’t be this much an hour. You mean per minute, right?”

After the well was hooked up, some things fell into place, like the bathroom and the wood stove. We had a comfortable winter, albeit with privacy blankets hung on some interior walls. Rick H. pulled into the driveway and announced that he was there to mud and tape the drywall!

Chapter 16

The Garden in the Country

I'm never sure if I like to garden or hate it. I know I'm not fond of the hard work, the digging, the bending over, and even the planting. Naturally, I like to harvest. In Oshawa, my first real garden, I produced large quantities of vegetables in a small space on my front lawn. Of course, I had my business partner, Glenda, as a resource, and her skills and experience were nothing short of vast.

Growing our own food was critical for our plans for self-sufficiency, and I fully expected to have not much problem with it. My biggest difficulty would be growing food that would suit my family's tastes, food they would deign to eat. The kids I could coerce into eating a healthful vegetarian diet, but Rick was another story.

Anyway, I wanted to get started right away. One morning during our first week in the country, Rick went searching for someone to plow a plot for me. After asking several neighbours with plows, Rick found Paul, who was willing to do the job that afternoon for a reasonable price. He brought his tractor and dug up a rectangular area about six times bigger than my first garden in Oshawa. It was in the middle of the field in front of the house-to-be.

I went out the next morning and raked. There were endless rocks to remove. I began to plant, figuring there would be enough nutrients in the soil for one year. I'm quite sure I was wrong because my harvest was definitely unbalanced. I was also wrong to plant so soon after plowing, not allowing the ground to settle first. I had dozens of pumpkins and other squash that year but almost no beans, peas, carrots, turnips, beets, cabbage, or any other vegetables, even though I planted them all. My cabbages that came up went to the little white moths, and my pole beans

fell down over and over from their tepee-shaped support. The slightest whisper of a breeze blew them over. We had a few meals from the garden, but it certainly wasn't necessarily going to take us through the winter.

I had lots to learn. Instead of learning it, I began to write a gardening column, but it was all knowledge in my head and didn't necessarily translate well into practical application. I wrote for the Campbellford paper for 12 years. They also put the column into the Cobourg Star, their sister paper. People often called me to say, "You must have a wonderful garden. Could I come and see it some time?" I would cringe and tell them, "I write much better than I garden."

In designing the house, we prepared for the year when we actually had produce to keep over winter. We built a cold cellar into the basement which entailed leaving an insulated room about eight square feet with only a gravel floor. This allowed the atmosphere to be humid. The space ended up being storage for leftover building materials. I don't recall ever having food in there.

Gradually, my garden got smaller and smaller. At one point, I made it into raised beds, which worked a little better. As I grew fewer vegetables, I put in more flowers, especially medicinal herbs. The latter actually did well in my dry, gravelly conditions. After a few years, I had a whole four-by-four raised bed solidly packed with lavender. It looked strange but lovely out in the middle of the field.

Even though we had a small forest at one corner of the property, we put in quite a few trees: cherries, apples, and pears, none of which did very well. Carrie's dog dug up and made off with the cherry tree. We invested in two maple trees—a Norway maple and a sugar maple—and placed them so that they would grow large and shade the front, south-facing wall of the house. The first two years that they were in the ground were droughty. We carried water down to them from our baths during the summer

months and divided it between them. They are now big and beautiful and do their job of shading the front of the house very well.

We had an old apple tree on the western fence line, which was hugely prolific one year and barren the next. I don't know what sort of apples it produced, but they ripened in late August or early September. One year, when we had apples, I gathered up three green garbage bags, full, both from the ground and me climbing in among the wasps to pick the good ones. I drove them down the road to my neighbours, who had a large press. I took yogourt containers with me for the cider, and all they asked was that I take the pulp with me when I go. It went back into the garbage bags. While the pressing was happening, we chatted about the stack-wall house we were in, which he had built for his bride many years ago. I actually ended up with enough of the delicious cider to freeze for the winter.

By the time we moved to town, our garden had evolved organically into something quite attractive. It reminded me a bit of the Group of Seven painter J. E. H. MacDonald's "Tangled Garden." It didn't provide food for the winter or even for much of the summer, but it looked lovely, and I liked working with my medicinal herbs. There were quite a few of them: lavender, hops, rose hips, comfrey, absinth, calendula, echinacea, garlic, valerian, and more. I didn't use them often. Again, the lore was all in my head and not put to practical use. However, the fact that they at least grew gave me a feeling of serenity and security that I'd hoped to but failed to get from my vegetable garden.

Chapter 17

The Fire Inspector

The day of the Hastings Resource Centre/Day Care board meeting at which we decided to remover the coordinator from her job, my daughter Carrie was volunteering there. She phoned me around four to say, “Mom, you have to come in and see this guy who is here. He says he’s the fire inspector, and you can’t build a wooden fire escape.”

“What do you mean he’s the fire inspector? We already had the inspector, and he told us the fire escape had to be wood.”

“I don’t know,” said Carrie. “He’s leaving now, but he’s coming back tomorrow, and he wants to talk to you. He and Nancy seem to be friends. I just thought I should tell you about him.”

“Thanks, Carrie,” I said, appreciating her insight.

The next morning, with the unpleasant job of firing Nancy done and the phone constantly ringing with calls from the press and more of her supporters, the treasurer and I were there to do whatever needed doing. Halfway through the morning, I looked up to see a cowboy standing in the doorway. I had to look twice to be sure he wasn’t wearing a holster with a six-shooter. He was dressed in all black and flashing a silver badge.

“I’m here to see Marg Santon,” he said.

“That’s me,” I said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Steve Smith, Hastings’ new fire inspector. I’ve come to inspect these premises, and from what I see so far, I could keep you closed for months,” he said in a nasty tone.

I never could get an answer from him as to why he would want to keep us closed for months or why our previous inspection wasn’t adequate. “To start with,” he said, “You need a metal fire escape.” At the time, our daycare was housed in the old town hall, getting ready to move. I phoned the office of the Ontario Fire

Marshall, who assigned an engineer to our case who would attend the inspection. They would not, however, interfere with the municipality's wishes and actions. The engineer said that a wooden fire escape was what we wanted and should have.

The next day, Steve showed up still looking like he should be in a Western movie. He brought along another man who obviously worked for him. Together with the engineer and Kevin, our government funding rep who just kept shaking his head when he looked at Steve, we toured the building. Steve totalled up what he figured we needed.

“About twenty thousand dollars worth of equipment needed here. I know where you can get a good deal. I have a company that sells all of it, and my friend Wayne here installs it.”

“I would call that a conflict of interest, wouldn’t you?” I asked.

“No, I don't think so. I’ll ask at the town office what they think about it.”

A few days later, Steve came in and told me that the town had said it would be better if he kept the job at arm’s length, but he also said that his friend could supply and install it all because he had his own company, too. He’d tell him to bring in his quote right away.

“Sure,” I said.

Friend Wayne was not very smart, and the two of them must have thought I was an idiot. He brought the quotation on letterhead with Steve’s company’s name on it. Steve claimed it was an accident. I phoned the Fire Marshall’s office again, and an investigator arrived at my house a few days later asking for the quote, which he took as evidence. This gentleman also told me they, the office of the Ontario Fire Marshall, had been trying to get this guy, Steve, for some time. He also asked if Steve had shown me a badge.

He said, “The badge is handmade by him, and it’s illegal. You probably won’t hear anything from us for a while, but just hang on, and we’ll deal with him. This helps a lot,” he said, holding up

the quotation. “He comes from Pickering, where he chased the fire trucks around in a red painted-up van. We’ll get him. Just have patience.”

Meanwhile, we were losing hundreds of dollars a week as the daycare was stuck in the basement of the town hall, where we were no longer licensed to operate, while our new home awaited the work it needed to make it safe. Ironically, the old town hall has since burned to the ground.

I asked to appear before a meeting of the town’s fire committee. Steve was there to shout me down, and I left from there a wreck. The chairman of the committee added to Steve’s insults, saying, “You know, Marg, you’d get further if you weren’t so sour.” I left the committee and immediately drove to Kevin’s office at our funding source to tell him I was ready to quit. When he saw me, he rushed and got a rocking chair with a warm throw and a cup of tea. He called the Fire Marshall’s office and was told the same thing once more, “Have patience, we’re on top of it.”

Meanwhile, we knew we needed the fire escape, wood or steel. And at long last, I answered the phone, and it was the assistant to our local MPP to whom I’d written my whole tale of woe. He told me Steve was gone—gone out of Hastings. We were free to open as soon as the new inspector signed the forms. I hung up the phone and called him.

“Now that Steve’s gone, I want to make an appointment with you for an inspection so we can open up,” I said.

“What? Steve’s not gone. Where did you hear that?”

“Okay,” I said. “When you’re ready to admit that Steve is, in fact, gone, call me please, and we’ll set up an appointment as soon as possible.”

There was a fairly long pause, and then he said, “Wednesday afternoon at four.”

“Okay,” I said as I realized it was over.

So, this was volunteering in Hastings! Before I did it again, I would choose carefully who I worked for.

Chapter 18

Buttercup

Buttercup was Carrie's 4H project. She came to us as a tiny lamb, terrified and bleating all the way home in the Volvo. We brought her into the house upon her arrival, where she immediately encountered Roxy, our young boxer. Her facial expression, the instant she spotted the white dog, altered almost to a smile; the bleating stopped, and her tiny body relaxed. It was as if she gave a sigh of relief. "Mama," she seemed to say. Roxy looked at Buttercup with huge curiosity and backed away a little. It wasn't long before the dog was lying down, and the lamb was butting and poking with her front hooves at Roxy's belly, trying to nurse. Again, the gentle, patient Roxy gave the strange creature a long, curious stare but didn't pull away.

Buttercup grew big and healthy over the summer under Carrie's care. During the daylight hours, she had free-range of our four acres. She mostly stayed close to the house, grazing on grass and flowers from the gardens. Red ones were her favourites. At night or in bad weather, she hid in the lean-to Carrie had built for her.

When fall came, Carrie took her project to the fair. Out of five sheep, B'Cup came last. I still have no idea by what standards the animals were measured and compared, but I could soon empathize with her because I ran for election that year and came last of five candidates as well.

Regardless of Buttercup's standing in the sheep world, Carrie had no intention of letting her go off to be anonymous in a herd or, worse still, become mutton. Instead, we loaded her into the Volvo again, and she came back to our house and her friend Roxy. There, for the next several years, she and Roxy butted heads both as a greeting and as part of their play. Together, they raced around the property, leaping and hopping like jack-in-the-boxes. If I

crouched down and pointed the top of my head at her, Buttercup would run up, and I'd get butted too. If we went for a walk, usually along the abandoned rail trail, we'd only get a few hundred feet out, and there would be galloping hoof beats coming up behind us. Buttercup and Roxy would run on ahead, wait for us to catch up and pass them, and then thunder past us again like leapfrog.

We had an outdoor wedding for Tanya in June. Buttercup mingled with the guests, although she was a little shy and didn't want them to touch her. Carrie or I were always welcome to hug her, but at the wedding, she adroitly avoided all the little and not-so-little people who chased her around for a closer look and to feel real wool. She only made one comment while she was shut in her pen during the exchange of vows. When Reverend Love (Yes, that was his real name) came to the phrase, "And God said," everyone heard a loud "Baaa."

I felt that as well as being a good companion, Buttercup was very decorative. She'd lie down beside a flower bed or stand stock still grazing on the front lawn. People would ask if she was real or a plywood cutout.

Buttercup's life wasn't all playing with Roxy and grazing. We did a couple of sheep things with her, too. She was sheared once. I kept the fleece for years, intending to spin it into yarn for a sweater. Also, Carrie sent her away to be bred once. On the morning after I figured she was in labour (I actually knew nothing about sheep midwifery), I hurried out to see the new arrival, but there didn't appear to be one in the lean-to. Buttercup was standing outside, watching me with disdain. Then, she inclined her head as if to say, "Look over here, you idiot," and there was her tiny black baby in the grass.

One day, as she grazed, a rabid fox coolly walked up behind Buttercup and sunk his teeth into her back leg. We happened to be watching from the dining room. I went out and called her into the house and yelled at the fox to go away. On the advice of the

government vet I called, we scrubbed her wound with a wire brush and Dettol, being careful not to come into contact with any fox saliva. The government vet came and immunized her, then quarantined her for 60 days. We all dreaded going out every morning to see if rabies was developing in our beloved Buttercup. Of course, I thought of Old Yeller. However, Buttercup was fine to the vet's and to our amazement.

We were considering a move to town; Carrie had reached her teenage years and was busy with activities other than caring for her pets. It was a sad day when she sold Buttercup back to the farmer who had given her to us. He did promise to keep her around as a breeding ewe and to call her by her name. He had always marvelled at her level of health and the fact that she answered to her name. He'd always believed sheep couldn't do that. I think she went to a good home, but I'll never be totally free from the feeling that we abandoned a friend.

Chapter 19

Encounters With Wildlife

On our first week in the packing crate cottage, I sat at the dining room table and watched two birds I'd never seen before strutting about, eating on the lawn. One, a Baltimore oriole, I knew from pictures; the other, I had to look up; it was a bobolink. As these two returned every year at this time, I discovered that I loved both their songs. The oriole made beautiful music, and the bobolink burbled at me as I planted the garden. There were plenty of other birds I'd never seen in the city, like a meadowlark, many red-tailed hawks and a few harriers, turkey vultures, ospreys, and more. We had a bird feeder outside the living room window, which attracted flocks of red-breasted grosbeaks, a Canada jay, and, once, a little ermine.

One midwinter afternoon, I was passing through the living room when I glanced across toward the island. I noticed a huge black bird poised on the edge of the ice, staring into the open channel of the river. I said to Rick, "If I didn't know better, I'd say that was a bald eagle." The binoculars showed us it was, in fact, an eagle. He hung around all afternoon and came back a few more times that winter. Since then, bald eagles seem to be a relatively common sight in Hastings.

Some of the wildlife we only heard and never saw. For instance, coyotes yipped on the hill across the river. I love their sound, but others don't. A sound I did not like was the blood-curdling shriek of the barn owl, which hung out in the graveyard beside us. Another owl, the great horned, had a much softer owly call, who … whooo … who-who… which I liked. My favourite call happened in the night in the spring. One year in particular, I must have listened to four or five loons outside my study window calling and responding to each other for at least half an hour every evening. It was thrilling. Another night-time sound in the spring

was the woodcock which was wooing its mate with a buzzing, almost electrical sound in the meadow out front of the house.

We never encountered a bear, although one afternoon, the kids came in with a report of someone having seen one on the train tracks near our place. It sent us flying to find the dogs and the sheep and get them into the house.

Our first porcupine experience was strange. We'd had a load of firewood delivered for our first winter in the house. Roxy gave it a thorough sniffing and managed to come up with a dead porcupine in there somewhere. She had a face full of quills. I just happened to be on my way out the door to an interview for a part-time job with a vet. I took her with me, and the quills were removed for free, but I didn't get the job.

At least once a year, usually in June, an enormous snapping turtle came up the driveway on its way to lay her eggs in the railway bed. One time, Rick and I were sitting on the deck beside the cedar hedge on the brink of the hill down to the river when the turtle arrived. Hidden under the end of the hedge was a stack of glass bricks we'd purchased at a yard sale and planned to use in the bathroom. The turtle gave no thought to our intentions for the bricks and barrelled right into the pile. She clambered over and around any which way, smashing them to bits as she went, and we listened. I don't think she hurt herself, and I believe she made it down the slope to lay her eggs.

Chapter 20

Hunters and Hunting

On a certain day in September every year, I am wakened by a volley of gunshots. This shooting goes on day after day until the hunters are bored with the activity, or they've killed their legal limit. We get to watch the widowed geese floating around, searching for their lost partners. Geese mate for life. Then, later in the fall comes deer and moose season. We had heard from the day we came to Hastings that it was impossible to hire help during hunting season. It seemed that everybody hunted.

I moved to the country with a strong bias against hunting and made my feelings known in letters to the papers. I quickly gained a reputation for being an ignorant city person. The main argument in favour of hunting deer is that it controls the population and improves the species by eliminating the smaller, weaker specimens. I think this is a poor argument since hunters are always looking for prize trophies. I felt that it was the human population that needed some selection. Another argument against hunting is the fact that someone usually gets shot, sometimes killed by stray bullets. It isn’t safe to walk in the woods during hunting season.

As I got to know people in our rural area, I began to realize that there are responsible hunters who shoot deer, moose, and geese to fill their freezers. I stopped writing to the papers, especially after my daughter married an avid and serious hunter who follows the rules.

Chapter 21

Anne Boulton

Animal rights activists are often viewed as extremists, and I guess quite a few of them are just that, willing to damage property to save animals and make their points. I've never gotten past being an advocate for non-human beings, doing demonstrations, writing letters and such, but along the way, I've met some extreme and fascinating characters.

One woman who made a huge impression was Anne Boulton. Anne phoned me one day to introduce herself after she'd read an anti-hunting letter I'd written to the editor of the local paper. (Rural living has since modified my views on hunting. I was very negative back then.) She wanted me to accompany her to the University of Toronto Medical School to demonstrate against testing on animals. I said I would like to meet her first. She agreed to stop by for tea the next time she was in Hastings.

Anne arrived in her rusty white van clutching a small three-legged, one-eyed little dog on her lap. Aside from her age, which I guessed to be upwards of 70, her tiny stature, and her non-stop talkativeness, the most notable feature of her presence was the smell that enveloped her like a cloud and moved with her. I assumed such an odour couldn't be avoided when you shared your living quarters with several dozen cats and as many dogs. Sometime after her first visit, Anne mailed me a note and left my mailbox and all the other letters smelling like her.

I was invited to her house to help with a mailing campaign she had devised against the Ontario laws around using animals from shelters in research labs. She pointed out that she almost never let anyone past her front door but that she trusted me not to make trouble for her with the authorities. On my approach, the front of the house looked like a tidy little bungalow with white curtains at the window. The gardens and front lawn were neat as well. As I

stepped inside, I was assailed by the smell once again and by a huge racket as the dogs barked their greetings from a back room. Anne took me down the hall past a crowded and cluttered kitchen where she cooked both for herself and for the animals and looked after their meds. We came to the two bedrooms. In place of regular doors, they had full-height chain link gates. They also each had a pet door that led outside to a generous run. One room was full of cats, the other dogs. All of these creatures seemed to love Anne, and she had names for most of them.

We went into her living quarters, which consisted of one large room that would have been the living room in a normal house. Most of the space was used as storage, piled high with heavy, dark Victorian antiques. The walls displayed a number of paintings in gilt frames, all of them draped in cobwebs. It brought to my mind a Charles Dickens novel.

Anne had carved herself a hole in the clutter near the door where she slept, ate, wrote, and made phone calls. Her space held a divan and a coffee table that supported a telephone, a typewriter, and stacks of correspondence.

We sat on the divan, and she told me some of her history. Her family was well-to-do. Much of her own money came from the sale of some real estate in Toronto. The property, it turned out, was in the old Yorkville area, Hazelton Lanes. She was spending the proceeds on her efforts for the animals.

When concerned about an issue, Anne wouldn't hesitate to pick up the phone and call anyone that she thought might be helpful, be they a corporate CEO, a federal minister, or even a head of state. Somehow, she knew ways of getting through directly to them, and she was often successful. Sometimes, her phone calls resulted in long-term friendships and support.

Anne loved to brag about her three husbands. She’d been divorced twice, while the third husband had died. That was too bad, she said, because he was her favourite. I eventually lost touch with Anne.

Chapter 22

We Are Not the Nearings

In the mid-70s, survivalism was the rage. It was part of the motivation for moving to the country. Every bookstore had a section on how to build and stock a bomb shelter, how to be self-sufficient in food, or how to build your own house in the wilderness. I was definitely interested in the fallout shelter literature as I was suffering from an atom bomb phobia and was sure that apocalyptic times were fast approaching. I had even written to the Government of Canada asking for their information on the subject. They sent me a fat envelope which included a little book called "Fallout on the Farm." It instructed me, as a farmer, to get out the tractor and remove topsoil from my fields and put it somewhere. Then, get some more clean, non-radioactive soil and spread it around. *Voila!* A working farm again. Even I, born and bred in the big city, knew this was ludicrous.

Survivalism lost its appeal, at least for me. However, I discovered that I had an interesting collection of books on the slightly related subject of homesteading. I decided that I wanted us to be self-sufficient. That meant living in the country, building our own energy-efficient house, growing everything we ate, baking bread, and milking goats.

Among the books I'd acquired and pored over were the writings of Helen and Scott Nearing on what they labelled "The Good Life." In several volumes, they chronicled their experience back in the 30s, when Scott was fired from his job as an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania for belonging to the Communist Party. I became a huge fan of their dedication to sane living and intended to emulate them when we homesteaded. They were the real pioneers, models for many back-to-the-landers. Meanwhile, I should have been listening as

Rick declared, "I'm not your Scott Nearing." I took him seriously, but for many years, I thought I could work around his disinterest.

While we still lived in Oshawa, I learned to garden and bake bread. I met Glenda and partnered with her to establish a curbside recycling program there. She had already been a hippie homesteader. She'd even looked after a herd of goats, and she taught me a great deal, much of which I couldn't apply until I had the right rural setting.

Alas, it was not to be. However, many years passed before I accepted the fact. I finally made a conscious decision to be happy with things just as they were. I realized my efforts had yielded much that contributed to a good life for us, even though it fell short of my homesteading dream. For instance, I learned I was a lousy gardener. My family would starve on the produce of my vegetable plot. However, I continued to putter, and in the process, I learned that I wrote well about gardening, which resulted in over a decade of columns in the local newspaper.

Rick, while still insisting he was not a homesteader type, did get excited about designing and building a house. He was also willing to come with me to visit Helen Nearing in Maine. Scott had died following his 100th birthday. The afternoon we spent with her at their Forest Farm remains a highlight of my life, regardless of the fact that I couldn't follow in her footsteps as fully as I would have liked. She showed us all around her house and garden. I could see that Rick would never be inclined to work in as disciplined a fashion as Scott—not many would. The garden wall at Forest Farm illustrated Scott's work ethic: 420 feet long and four feet high, with another four in the ground for a foundation, the whole structure was made of rocks found on the property, and carried by and to the site over a period of years.

I still have all my books on self-sufficiency, and I love to look at them. I remind myself that Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond was just that and only lasted a bit more than two years. I'm

satisfied that my dabbling has taught me some good lessons. They are mainly spiritual lessons. Who knows what kind of trouble I might be in if Rick hadn't abridged my plans.

Chapter 23
The Studio

A very dark period of my life began with my being diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease. Around the same stretch of time, we lost four dogs to assorted weird circumstances and then Rick lost his job to downsizing. I didn't have a job other than teaching yoga part-time and that meant almost no income.

I was used to adversity—actually thrived on it. I was proud of my ability to overcome problems with creative solutions. This time, however, I felt beaten, directionless, even desperate. I figured prayer would be appropriate but had never really learned how to do that effectively. Everyone said, surrendering, giving up control was the way to go. It seemed to me, though, that had been taken care of for me.

Long before I realized it, things had gradually begun to sort themselves out. Rick took a course in reflexology which led to a job at Ste. Anne's Country Inn and Spa. Then, we were given a dog by an acquaintance who had just had a baby and couldn't handle both pet and infant. Storm was loving and nice to have around despite being badly behaved some of the time. Finally, we came up with a solution to our financial shortfall that was fun and fixed a problem for our daughter Carrie and her young family at the same time.

Carrie and Darrell and newborn Justine needed an affordable place to live. We decided to rent them our house, and we would live in an apartment above the as yet un-built garage. It was late summer, and we figured we could be in well before Christmas. The project would be financed by selling property we owned in Prince Edward County. As it turned out, the studio, as we named our creation mainly for permit purposes, was one of the loveliest spaces I've ever lived in, full of light and air, and it made me feel good.

Chapter 23, The Studio

Every cubic inch of the studio's three hundred square feet was useful and beautiful partly because we didn't stint on windows. The shape was a basic rectangle in “Golden Mean” proportions. The garage was on the bottom with a sauna in one corner and an outside stair leading to a second floor stoop. The upstairs was cantilevered a couple of feet over each side of the garage. As you stepped in the door, you immediately faced an almost vertical ship's ladder to the sleeping loft. The loft covered the back half of the studio while the front was open to form a twelve-foot cathedral ceiling. The front gable end sported a semicircular window that we'd rescued from the dump. It came from the old town hall in Hastings. This half-round window provided a view down the long driveway and into the hills when you sat up in bed in the loft.

Building went smoothly. I must have been getting better at praying because one day Rick was working on drywall and muttering a lot of negativity about needing a wood stove. He fretted that we'd never find one small enough or cheap enough and we'd never have time to shop for it either. To quiet him down, I said “Don't worry about it. When we need a stove, it will appear.” Half and hour later, a friend drove up the driveway and during coffee mentioned that his neighbour had a good wood-stove for sale for a hundred dollars. The only trouble was it was small. Of course, it was perfect for our needs and the studio was never cold.

We had electricity and running water, albeit just cold running water. I never minded heating water on the stove for washing or cooking. There was the sauna for bathing and if we really wanted to bathe like regular people, Carrie didn't mind us coming over to her house. I suppose the biggest inconvenience was the outhouse at the bottom of the outdoor stairs. It was a lovely little room with a picture window looking out on a hay field and the old cemetery. It was nice in summer to sit and watch the baby foxes play on the large round bales. However, getting down the icy steps was a

challenge in winter. We spent one summer and two winters in the studio.

Once, early in our first year, Rick was absorbed in watching the Grey Cup game on TV. The stairs were wet, and I went out to visit the outhouse. I had just begun my descent when I lost my footing and slid to the bottom on my back. “Fuuuuck,” I hollered as my behind bumped each step. Once down I turned around and crawled back up into the studio, closing the door and sitting back against it on the floor to catch my breath and maybe get some sympathy from Rick. Not a chance. Without turning his eyes from the TV, he inquired “Are you having some kind of fit?”

Rick had his own issue with the stairs. The dog broke her leg trying to escape the neighbour's shotgun blast when she was chasing his chickens. The vet pinned the leg. Then Rick had to carry all sixty pounds of her down the steps twice a day for six weeks during January and February.

We had many good times in the studio. I loved getting up each morning and opening the window to hear one-year-old Justine calling out from the upstairs window of the big house, “Hi Gramma.” Other good times included New Year's Eve and birthday parties, and even my dad's celebration of life with a hundred people attending. It never felt crowded or in any way uncomfortable.

The time came, and it happened quite suddenly, when we knew we wanted to move into town to a house we'd had our eye on for years. I phoned the owner, and we moved the following day, completing the purchase and sale of the two properties later in the spring. Carrie and Darrell had enough money by then to purchase their own house.

The studio had brought me through the dark time, and I was grateful. I'd adjusted to all the new circumstances while marvelling at how, if we allow it, the universe answers our prayers but often in ways we would never imagine.

Afterword

The time came when we wanted to move to town—not back to the city, just into the village. Our house was not quite finished. We put the last touch on it the day we moved—a coat of urethane on the living room floor.

People always ask, “Why?” The simple answer is, “It was time.” We found it difficult to face another winter with the 700-foot driveway, and my Parkinson’s disease was making mobility a problem. Also, we had discovered a fixer-upper in town built in 1958 that interested us.

Country life has taught us much. We would never return to the city to live.

Margaret Santon